IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATION GAPS AMONG NIGERIAN IMMIGRANTS IN CHINA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

China was the global epicenter of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Its multi-lingual predilection did not facilitate the propagation of COVID-19-related health information among immigrants in China because the language of awareness creation was the Mandarin language. The obvious communication gaps created may have exerted undue psycho-social effects on the immigrants. Therefore, the study seeks to evaluate the psycho-social impact of communication gaps on Nigerian immigrants in China during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fifty (50) respondents were interviewed through phone calls, responses were graded and analyzed using simple percentages. The psycho-social impacts were identified as fear, uncertainty, depression, loneliness, and social disruption. Forty percent (40%) of the respondents reported fear, loneliness (30%), social disruption (15%), uncertainty (10) and depression (5%). Most health information was disseminated in the Mandarin language, excluding most Nigerian immigrants from access to vital information on the disease pattern and preventive measures. The language of communication is key in the dissemination of health information; hence, an international language may have significantly narrowed the communication gap during the pandemic.

Keywords: Impact, Communication, Immigrants, Nigeria, Covid-19, Psycho-social.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus COVID-19 is a deadly disease that erupted from Wuhan in the Hubei province of China. Wuhan was the epicenter of the disease. There are up to ten thousand Nigerians in China. Some are students while some are businessmen who have come to do one business or the other. China is one of the

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economic hub centers for Nigerian merchants. COVID-19 ushered in a lot of ruptured international relationships and the African-China relationship was not left behind. There were a lot of evictions and maltreatment of Nigerians in China. This racism against Nigerians and other Africans damaged China's purported interest in Nigeria or other African nations. It is clearly against its claimed international policies. On March 28, 2020, China imposed an entry ban on all foreigners due to the rising cases of COVID-19 in Guangzhou, the business hub for Africans in China. They claimed the imported cases were rising after they had curbed the domestic infection. The Chinese airlines could only run on one route per week in any country of the world to bring back only Chinese oversea nationals, who wish to return to China. As the imported cases became the biggest challenge to China's battle against COVID-19, foreign nationals who arrived in China before March 28 quickly became the center of attention. In particular, the central government put great pressure on all local cities to minimize the number of imported cases. Guangzhou, the home to Asia's largest African migrant population, suddenly became the front line of China's renewed battle with COVID-19. Notably, local authorities have identified Africa as the source of the largest number of imported COVID-19 cases—among all foreign cases identified in Guangzhou, 76 percent have been from African countries, including 36 percent from Nigeria alone. More specifically, by April 11, the city of Guangzhou had identified a total of 119 imported cases of COVID-19, 25 of whom are foreign nationals—including nine Nigerians, three Angolans, two Nigeriens, two from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and one each from France, Brazil, the U.K., Australia, Syria, Russia, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Madagascar. (Sun, 2021). Nigerians and other African nationals suffered at the hands of the Chinese nationals because of this. There was discriminatory rhetoric backed by actions against Nigerians, who did not understand their language. They were denied access to some services, denied access to shop for food in some shopping malls.

Methodology

Fifty (50) respondents were interviewed through phone calls, responses were graded and analyzed using simple percentages.

Results

Table 1: Percentage of Psychosocial Factors

Psycho-social factors (%)

Fear disruption	uncertainty	depression	loneliness	social
40	10	5	30	15

The psycho-social impacts were identified as fear, uncertainty, depression, loneliness, and social disruption. Forty percent (40%) of the respondents reported fear, loneliness (30%), social disruption (15%), uncertainty (10) and depression (5%).

Discussion

Nigerian immigrants in China were stigmatized which led to uncertainty, loneliness, depression, social disruption. There were also some stigmatizing factors like fear of isolation, racism, discrimination, and marginalization with all its social and economic ramifications (Sin, 2008). A stigmatized individual tends to seek medical information late, also has the tendency to hide health information which in turn jeopardizes others and increases the risk of transmission if already infected. A nation-wide study from China revealed that migrant workers had experienced the highest level of distress, which was significantly greater than all the occupations (Qiu J., 2020). WHO released psychosocial considerations that should be considered to help lessen the stigma of COVID-19. Stigmatization leads to health crimes which originated from the fear of being Covid-19 positive.

Forty (40%) percent of the respondents indicated fear as the major psycho-social factor. Every human communication must be made through a language. The English language is the global language of communication, the need for language translation in a non-English speaking country like China cannot be over-emphasized. Most Nigerian immigrants in China could not understand the instructions relating to the awareness and preventive measures of the COVID-19 pandemic because they were mostly relayed to the people using the Mandarin language, a local Chinese language. There were no translation communities available whether physical or online, which led to frustration and depression. WeChat is the major social media platform in China, and due to its unpopularity, little or no information could be dispensed from there. The world's largest communication networks are the Facebook and WhatsApp, which are banned in China and can only be used using the VPN, this grossly caused the dearth of information to the immigrants which greatly jeopardized their health. Donations of medical materials were also made by local governments, enterprises,

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non-governmental organizations and individuals from 84 countries (State Council Information Office of the P. R. China 2020). However, many of these international donation and procurement activities were hindered by language and cultural barriers (Chen 2020, Zhang and Yuqin, 2020). In any disaster or crisis involving multilingual populations, access to translated information needs to be seen not only as a human right (Greenwood et al. 2017), but as a means of disaster prevention and relief that can increase individual and community-level resilience (Piller, Li, and Zhang 2020). In recent years, crowdsourced translation has been increasingly used to solve urgent and complex multilingual crisis communication problems during public emergencies (Brabham *et al.* 2014; Hester *et al.* 2010; Munro 2010; Sutherlin 2013). Immigrants unable to process the Mandarin language are the most vulnerable to the disease. In times of a national disaster on this scale it is always the government's role to lead. All disaster preparation and response must be led by the state, including the creation and activation of an effective communications plan (Pillar, 2020).

Uncertainty constituted 10% of the respondents' opinion. The COVID-19 pandemic required a multiple and linguistically diverse communication need. The dissemination of all health information was done in the mandarin language, consequently most Nigerians could not understand the scale of the infection and preventive measures by the Government, they became vulnerable to the disease. There were a lot of anti-china sentiments due to their lack of transparency in sharing data and knowledge with the international communities. The Chinese government blamed the problems they were experiencing with the international community on the manipulation of information by certain forces.

Depression accounted for 5% of the respondents' opinion on psycho-social factors. Nigerian immigrants in China experienced a high level of uncertainty in their daily lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them were evicted from their homes and they slept on the streets. There was a high rise of psychological and emotional trauma among Nigerians living in China. Till date most of their foreign students, Nigerians inclusive, have not been allowed entry into China even when they have all paid full school fees and just went on holidays to their countries. The segregation and maltreatment of foreign nationals in China is shocking. The bias against Nigerians and other African nationals have been there long before the COVID-19 pandemic, only that it got heightened by it. The pandemic formed a base for a more aggressive launch of the resentment against Nigerian and African immigrants. In the society, implicit racism, and discrimination against Africans, or more broadly, "black people," is not new and had been observed long before the COVID-19 crisis. However,

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COVID-19 has brought this tension to new levels, and, in the case of Guangzhou, (falsely) presents Africans as a direct threat to the safety and security of the local Chinese. (Sun, 2021).

China-Africa relations faced an unprecedented crisis after several days of evictions and maltreatment of African migrants by landlords and local authorities in Guangzhou.
There were photos, videos, and other accounts which began to surface on Twitter and Facebook depicting young African migrants being forced to leave their homes and hotels. These evictions largely took place in Guangzhou's Yuexiu district. The district includes the neighbourhoods of Xiaobei and Guangyuanxi, home to the largest African diaspora populations in China, and Asia at large. A key turning point occurred on Friday, when photos of young men forced to sleep outside on the street, visibly cold and wearing surgical masks to protect them from COVID-19, started going viral on Facebook and Twitter (Olander, 2020).

Nigerian immigrants in China experienced severe loneliness due to isolation and quarantine. Most Nigerian immigrants and other immigrants coming from third world countries could not pay for the cost of the mandatory quarantine because the cost is billed to the individuals, even the treatment of these immigrants who are not covered by the Chinese health insurance. This led to a psychological burden for the immigrants. With the charge of $40-$50 per day during the quarantine and an average cost of $2,500 for treatment on the ground, many affected Africans will have a difficult time footing the bill. This situation is particularly true now given how COVID-19 has disrupted the livelihoods of many local African traders (Sun, 2021). Restrictions can have psychological impacts like irritability, anger, confusion, frustration, despair, depression, suicide which all culminates to mental ill-health. Suspected isolated cases may suffer from anxiety due to uncertainty about their health status and develop obsessive-compulsive symptoms, such as repeated temperature checks and sterilization (Li,W. et al.2020) Effects such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been reported, symptoms of which have been positively associated with the duration of quarantine (Hawryluck, L. et al., 2004, Reynolds D.L., et al 2008). Voluntary quarantine should be encouraged after a proper dissemination of the usefulness of it has been mass communicated. Thirty percent (30%) of the participants felt lonely during the period of the pandemic.

Lack of transparency on the operations and effects of the vaccine had led to a high-level of unacceptability of the vaccine by Nigerians in China. No phase 3 trial results for any China developed vaccine have been published in any peer reviewed journal.

All the vaccines were all locally approved. Their Government promised to monitor the post-marketing effects of the vaccine but all to no-avail. This has greatly generated distrust in immigrants. Global health challenges entail quick responses and cooperation. But, new "info media ecosystems" of today's world, popularly termed as social media, can also have some disastrous effects on control and outcomes of an infectious disease pandemic (Al-Garadi M.A., 2016). Social disruption made up 15% of the respondents' opinion on psycho-social factors.

Conclusion

China went into the crisis with a monolingual approach to public communication. When people have equitable access to communication, there is a unified society. Quality communication is paramount during any form of crisis. The information flow should be at its zenith to erect an effective barrier against the infection. The translation of the Mandarin language to other global languages is paramount to the spread of vital information for Immigrants. However, China's public health policies, Government interventions, restrictions and the Chinese people's public trust in the Chinese Government contributed to the early curbing of the disease.

Recommendations

1. There is need to breach all communication gaps between policy makers and immigrants to engender more spread of relevant health information during a pandemic.
2. The Chinese Government needs to design policies now to ensure local Africans' reintegration into local communities and punitive measures for future discriminatory practices against African nationals.

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